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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [EG](#) [KPAL](#) [IS](#)  
SUBJECT: MOD COMMENTS ON RAFAH SITUATION

REF: A. CAIRO 123

[1](#)B. JERUSALEM 126

Classified By: Ambassador Richard H. Jones, Reason 1.4 (b) (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. MOD Arab Affairs Adviser David Hacham briefed PolCouns January 24 on the Israeli reaction to the January 23 breaching of the border fence between Egypt and Gaza. Hacham, who is a regular MOD interlocutor with the Egyptian General Intelligence Service (EGIS), said he had delivered a message to EGIS from Defense Minister Barak January 23 which conveyed Barak's "expectation" that Egypt would act quickly to restore order to the border. Barak's message also contained assurances that Israel would not allow a humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Contrary to some press reports that the GOI sees the breach of the fence as a positive development, Hacham described it as a major Hamas victory and said Israel wants to work with Egypt to restore the status quo ante. The Egyptians reportedly assured Hacham that they would return the Palestinians in Sinai to Gaza within 48 hours, but Israel is concerned that terrorists will seek to take advantage of the opportunity to infiltrate the lightly guarded Israeli-Egyptian frontier south of the Philadelphi Corridor. Hacham expressed concern at a possible further deterioration in Israeli-Egyptian relations and said he would recommend that Barak call Mubarak and EGIS chief Omar Soliman when Barak returns from Davos. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) PolCouns met with MOD Arab Affairs Adviser David Hacham January 24. Hacham, who serves as a day-to-day MOD interlocutor with EGIS, described a series of conversations he had with senior EGIS official Omar Kinawi. Hacham said he was in near constant contact with Kinawi and the EGIS chief of station in Tel Aviv since Hamas succeeded in breaching the fence separating Egyptian Rafah from Gaza January 23. Hacham termed the breach, and ensuing flood of Palestinians entering Sinai, as a major victory for Hamas and a reversal of 60 years of Egyptian policy to keep Gaza separate from Egypt. He said the GOI was concerned that Palestinian terrorists who had entered Sinai from Gaza would seek to use the opportunity to infiltrate the lightly-guarded Israeli frontier south of the Philadelphi Corridor in order to carry out attacks in the Negev. (Note: DAO reports that the IDF and border police have reinforced their deployment along this stretch of lightly populated, and normally lightly patrolled, desert.)

[1](#)3. (C) Since Defense Minister Barak was traveling in Europe and attending the Davos conference, Hacham said he had delivered a message from Barak to Omar Soliman through Omar Kinawi. The message conveyed Barak's "expectation" that Egypt would take prompt action to restore the status quo ante at Rafah. Barak also assured the Egyptians that Israel would not allow a humanitarian disaster to occur in Gaza -- Hacham noted that Israel had shipped basic food supplies, medicine and limited quantities of diesel fuel into Gaza on January [1](#)24. Hacham commented that before the breach, he had negotiated an agreement with the Egyptians to allow limited

numbers of Palestinians to enter Egypt through the Kerem Shalom crossing for medical treatment or to study abroad. In addition, the MOD had facilitated the entry into Gaza of a Jordanian relief convoy, but this had been done without informing the Egyptians in order to avoid creating frictions between Jordan and Egypt. Hacham said that in response to Barak's message, Kinawi had assured him that Egypt would return all the many thousands of Palestinians who entered Sinai from Gaza within 48 hours, but Hacham was skeptical that Egypt had the capability to do this.

14. (C) In contrast to press reporting quoting some Israeli officials as seeing the collapse of the Rafah crossing as a positive development because it put the problem of Gaza squarely in Egypt's hands, Hacham said Israel was very concerned about the impact of this Hamas victory on Egypt and the PA. Hacham said that when Barak visited Egypt at the beginning of the month, he and Field Marshall Tantawi had agreed to form a joint committee to deal with the smuggling issue, but the Egyptians had never followed up despite repeated messages from the Israeli side. Hacham said he was also waiting for an Egyptian response to repeated queries regarding the continued influx of illegal African migrants into Israel from Sinai.

15. (C) Hacham expressed concern at the impact of this latest development on the already tense Israeli-Egyptian relationship. He said he felt a sense of urgency, adding that he would recommend that Barak phone Mubarak and Omar Soliman as soon as Barak returns from Davos.

16. (C) Comment: There is a range of views here about the impact of the breaching of the fence. Israeli NSC foreign policy adviser Eran Etzion told the Ambassador and PolCouns on the margins of the Strategic Dialogue that the status quo

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ante at Rafah could not be restored and that Israel might have to accept an Egyptian decision to restore the Rafah crossing to something like the arrangement that existed before the Hamas takeover last June. Meanwhile, Deputy Defense Minister Matan Vilnai, apparently without coordinating with Barak, told the media that he thought Egypt would now have to take responsibility for Gaza. None of our Israeli interlocutors acknowledge the irony of Israel demanding Egypt cope with controlling the movements of perhaps several hundred thousand Palestinians while still insisting that Egypt not introduce any additional border forces into the area.

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